

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Advent 3 – December 13, 2024
Matthew 11:2-11 – Greater than John
Rev Peter Wagner

In the name of Jesus. Amen. Today, as we continue preparing our hearts for the advent and coming of Jesus, we turn our attention to his forerunner, to John the Baptist. John was the first to recognize the Lord. Even as a baby, John leaped for joy in his mother Elizabeth's womb, when he heard the voice of Mary, the mother of his Lord. For even before he was born, John was filled with the Holy Spirit. He knew his mission: to point the world to Jesus, the Savior and coming King.

John the Baptist is the greatest of all those born of women. He is the new and greater Elijah, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord."

And John is the first and greatest pastor. John does what all the called ministers of Jesus are sent to do: He points the world to Jesus. Just as pastors today are sent by God to call the world to repentance and preach the law and gospel and make disciples and baptize, these things are exactly what John the Baptist came to do.

John preached again and again, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" He fiercely warned the people, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" And when they were cut to the heart, he instructed them how they should live, each according to his vocation. He said to the crowds, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." He said to the tax collectors, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." And he said to the soldiers, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

Through it all, John warned them of the coming Messiah, lest the people fail to recognize Jesus, lest they be found in unbelief and unrepentance, lest Jesus come in wrath, his winnowing fork in his hand, to burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. John warned them because he did not want them to be destroyed. He saw the axe already laid to the root of the tree, but he did not want it chopped down. He did not want them to perish in hell. He warned them in love, again and again, to turn and repent and be saved.

So John preached the law sternly. And he's an example to pastors today, not to hold back. They must preach the law in its full sternness, so the people may turn and repent and believe. Otherwise Jesus might return on judgment day and condemn the souls under their care. For if the people are unprepared and unready, the pastor himself will be held accountable. Their blood will be on his head.

So I am sent to warn you of the coming wrath, to wake you up and call you to repentance, lest you perish in hell. And I am sent to instruct you how to live in your daily life, according to your vocation as citizens, fathers and mothers, children, teachers, workers and employers. I'm sent to teach you what you should do, so you'll be ready on the day when Jesus comes again in glory.

And also like pastors today, John baptized the people, to wash away their sins, and open their hearts to Jesus. And he preached the gospel. He always pointed them to Jesus. "Look!" he said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

This was John's greatest privilege and joy. Announcing the gospel, pointing out the one none of the prophets before him pointed out. John was the first to actually say, "This is the Messiah, this is the Coming One, here he is, whom all the prophets foretold, here in the flesh, Immanuel, God with us. He is here now, Jesus, born to save his people from their sins."

And that privilege and joy is now mine today. I get to preach, every Sunday, "Behold the Lamb of God! Behold Jesus, your mighty God. Behold him dying as the atoning sacrifice for your sins, bearing your iniquity, like a lamb before his shearers, innocent and silent, filled with love for you. Believe in him, that you might be saved from the coming wrath, that you might escape the eternal punishment of your sins."

And yet like pastors today, John's words were mostly ignored and rejected. John had to bear the burden of rejection for speaking the truth. He was hated for confronting sin, hated for the name of Jesus. John had to take up his cross and follow Christ, he had to suffer for the sake of the gospel.

So when John preached against King Herod, when he confronted Herod for breaking the sixth commandment, for sexual immorality in taking his brother's wife, Herod did not repent. Instead, he put John in prison, to silence him. There John suffered for the name of Christ. And eventually, he was beheaded, the first martyr of the New Testament age.

But even as his day of martyrdom drew near, John remained faithful. As a faithful pastor, he kept turning his eyes to Jesus, he kept pointing his disciples to the Lord.

So even while he was in prison, John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

Maybe John himself had doubts in prison, I don’t know. He was human after all. Pastors today certainly have doubts about whether their preaching might be in vain. But I think it’s more likely that John’s faith was firm. Maybe he sent his disciples to Jesus for their own sake, so they would recognize the Messiah themselves, so they would know who to turn to, now that the forerunner was passing out of the picture. Either way, John was looking and pointing and turning both himself and those under his care to the right place, to the place where faithful pastors must always point and look and turn, to Jesus only.

And so Jesus replies with comfort. He points to the proof of his miracles. The blind see, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised. Jesus meant, “Do not be offended by me, John. Do not fear. Your preaching and ministry have not been in vain. Truly I am the Coming One. I am the way, the truth, and the life, the fulfillment of all that the prophets have spoken.”

Jesus is quoting from Isaiah, that he fulfills everything Isaiah said in chapter 35, “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.” He’s saying he fulfills everything Isaiah said in chapter 61, “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.” And he’s saying he fulfills everything Isaiah said in chapter 26, “Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead.”

“Therefore, John,” says Jesus – and his words apply to all pastors and preachers of the gospel, “Do not be afraid. Nothing you have preached has been misplaced. I am the Coming One, I am here. In me the gospel of salvation to all nations is fulfilled.”

“You will suffer and die, John, for the sake of my name. But take heart, for in me even the dead are raised up. Better yet, the poor in spirit hear the gospel, they receive eternal life, they have the riches of the kingdom of heaven, for my word endures forever.”

“So do not be offended or discouraged. Finish the race. Lift up your head. Rejoice to suffer for the sake of my name, because your faith is not in vain. My victory is certain.”

What a comfort this is to pastors, to all the stewards of the mysteries of Christ, who bear the burden of caring for souls. And also, what a comfort it is to the souls under our care, a comfort to you, that the gospel you hear is not in vain. Rejoice! For the Jesus you hear preached week after week is the true Coming One. He came already of old to die for you, he comes to you now in the church, and he will come at the last to save you, to judge the earth and destroy your enemies and give his glad commendation of righteousness to all who receive him by faith.

So this is the message for today: John the Baptist is the first pastor, the first proclaimer of the gospel, the first herald of good news. He prepares the people in repentance. He baptizes, binds and looses sin, and points us all to Christ, the true Lamb of God. These are the tasks of the pastor, through preaching God’s word and administering the sacraments.

And if you are willing to accept it, if you are willing to receive the testimony of your pastor like the testimony of John concerning Christ, then you will be called greater than John in the kingdom of heaven. So pay attention. Do not reject what you hear. Repent and believe the gospel. For Jesus has promised you, “The one who is least in the kingdom of heaven” – the least Christian who believes, “that believer is greater than John.” Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.